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ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

Approval of Spouse in Middle Age

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L. Troll
3/5/69

APPROVAL OF SPOUSE IN MIDDLE AGE[1]

With few exceptions research on marriage and the family has mostly been limited to the early years from courtship to child rearing. In fact, we have little empirical data about the middle years of life altogether. The middle age of the individual man and woman generally coincides with an equally critical period in the family life cycle.

The middle class man, whose life orientation for twenty years has been his career, and who has been directed outward and upward in his interests and activities, is now near the peak of that career, and facing a change in direction from upward and outward to downward and inward. At the same time his wife, whose major focus up to now has been her home and family, starts to look outward from her home, and sometimes even upward to a career (Neugarten, 1968). The family, which may have been a relatively impermeable nuclear unit during the major child-rearing years, now has to weaken its old boundaries and reorganize on a different basis.

Twenty years of shared living seem to result in progressive marital "disenchantment." In a longitudinal sample, Pineo (1961) found decreases in intimacy, in marital satisfaction, and in marital adjustment.

At this point in the individual and family life cycles, what can we say about those husbands and wives who still do approve of each other or are approved of by the other? In what kinds of families does such esteem tend to prevail? Are there any particular qualities in a middle-aged woman that a middle-aged husband tends to approve of, or, conversely, something in a middle-aged husband that his wife generally approves of? For that matter, what kind of middle-aged man or woman still approves of his spouse?

METHOD

The study sample consists of 78 white Chicago-area couples. Each husband and each wife had been given an hour and a half interview containing open-ended questions about family life, community and political affairs, occupation, and recreation. The families had been selected for a larger investigation into college youth and social change, in the course of which 100 college students and their parents were interviewed. The 78 couples reported on here are those for whom complete family data are available.

Since the sample had been selected for the purposes of the wider study, it is biased in several ways. For example, couples had been selected through their children, half of whom were left-wing student activists and the other half matched to these from college directories. Therefore, income and educational level are relatively high and there is a disproportionately large number of Jewish families - half the sample.

The operational definition of approval used here is inferred, global, and minimal. That is, a husband or wife is rated as approving of his spouse if, at any of six points in an open-ended interview, he or she refers to that spouse in strongly positive terms.

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1. This study is part of an investigation into college youth and social change, directed by Dr. Bernice Neugarten of the Committee on Human Development and Dr. Richard Flacks of the Department of Sociology, University of Chicago. It was partially supported by USPHS Grant MH 08062.

To illustrate, if the answer to the question, "How is your child like his mother?" mentions desirable traits such as "intelligent," "good-natured," or "considerate," it would be judged "approval" where the context suggested that these traits were considered desirable by the respondent. Inter-rater agreement was 90% for "Wife's approval of husband" and 62% for "Husband's approval of wife." The men were more often ambiguous in their interpersonal comments than were their wives.

Demographic information was supplied by the respondents. In addition, scores were derived for four other family dimensions: family power balance, affective expressivity, amount of conflict, and overall family intergration. These scores were based on the responses of all three family members: husband, wife, and child. They were derived in a complicated way to utilize maximally all relevant information including both precoded responses and judgmental ratings. Detailed descriptions of coding procedures and estimates of reliability have been reported earlier (see Troll, 1967). With the exception of the Family integration scores (r = .29) inter-rater agreement was good - above 80% in almost all cases.

In addition to the above measures, each interview protocol was rated for 20 personality dimensions. Half of these are value dimensions and the other half largely coping mechanisms. Examples of the value dimensions are Dedication to causes, Intellectualism, and Humanitarianism. Examples of the coping mechanisms are Passivity-dependence, Stereotyped sex-role behavior, and Indecisiveness. Inter-rater reliabilities are high for these personality ratings, ranging from.97 to .72, with but one exception of .58. Descriptions of the traits, the coding procedures, and the reliabilities can be found in Troll, Neugarten, and Kraines (1969) and Troll, (1967).

FINDINGS

Somewhat less than half - 45% - of the middle-aged men and women in the sample expressed clear approval of their spouse at some point in the interview. While a few more women than men approved, this difference is not statistically significant.

While the "approval" score used here cannot be equated with the marital satisfaction scores of Blood and Wolfe (1960) or Safilios-Rothschild (1967), or with the measures used by Pineo (1961), and therefore, it is only in the broadest sense that any comparisons can be attempted, it is interesting that such a large proportion of middle-aged individuals did indicate some approval. On the other hand, maybe we should turn around and approach from the opposite end to exclaim how sad it is that over half of these middle class respondents did not show any signs of approval.

In over half of the families, approval or lack of approval seems to be mutual. That is, both husband and wife express approval of the other in 20 families and neither husband nor wife does in 28 families. Only the wife approves in 18 families, and only the husband does in 12 families.

Most family studies justify using wives only as reporters of the marital situation because they estimate that the husbands' reports would not be significantly differnet from their wives. Whether or not the 62 percent mutuality of approval or lack of approval found here is a sufficiently high figure to

justify such unilateral reporting, I leave to your judgment.

The most conspicusous finding in these data is the association between approval of spouse and what one might call social conformity or conventionality, this shows up not only in the family measures, (see Table 1) but also in the personality ratings. Thus families in which mutual husband-wife approval exists are more likely to be moderate in politics and homogamous in religious background. The balance of power is with one or both parents rather than with the children. The wife is less likely to be employed. As for the personality trait , the only ones which differentiate approving from non-approving spouses or approved of from not approved of spouses are "Conventional moralism" and "Stereotyped sex-role behavior."

A parallel association between approval and family integration exists. Where couples are mutually approving, their family is more likely to be rated high on family integration, low on conflict, and high on affective expressivity.

Because of the high socioeconomic status of most of the families in the sample, it is not surprising that income is only slightly related to approval. While income <u>per se</u> is not important, an index of income per number of children is somewhat higher for mutually approving families.

The wife's employment outside the home - which, incidentally, was true for almost half of these families - seems to be associated with mutual absence of approval. On the other hand, where her job is a "career," if she is a social worker, a teacher, an editor, or a dancer, for example - she is more likely to approve of her husband, though he is not any more likely to approve of her.

Similarity in personality, and particularly in values, has been reported in an earlier paper (Troll, Neugarten, and Kraines 1969) to be substantial between husband and wife, and somewhat less but still significant between parent and child. Mutually approving couples were no more alike in personality than those who expressed no approval. However, mutually approving couples were more likely to transmit their conforming and conventional characteristics to their children.

The fact that most of the personality characteristics studied seem irrelevant to approval is consistent in a way with Pineo'ss finding that marital adjustment is not related to personal adjustment. Neither similarity nor complementarity of personality traits contribute to approval of the spouse as a person. Apparently nonconformists do not tend to approve of their equally conformist spouses. Nor does a passive-dependent or indecisive person approve more of a nondependent or decisive spouse. If complementarity on certain traits contributes to marital satisfaction at any time, it looks as if it must be on traits other than those rated here, or perhaps at a different time of life.

An interesting conclusion that may be drawn from these data is that it is the existence of family integration as such which contributes to approval of spouse rather than how that integration is achieved. The pivotal issue is that of family power balance. Blood and Wolfe, (1960) for example, conclude that family decision making is related to the wife's marital satisfaction only in the deviant situation where she is the dominant spouse, since this would occur only by default - where her husband if incompetent. Safilios-Rothschild

(1967) reports different power structures satisfying to the wife in different countries: Greek wives are more satisfied with husband-dominant households than are French wives. In the present data, which are based on a higher socioeconomic sample, mutual approval can occur when the husband is more powerful, when the wife is more powerful, or when both husband and wife are equally powerful but more powerful than their child. Apparently, at least for a sample like the present one, it does not matter too much which spouse takes the lead so long as a lead is taken. If the child is the strongest member of the family, he may not be as likely to work for the integrity of the family.

Table 1

Characteristics of Mutally Approving and Nonapproving Couples

Characteristic		Mutually Approving (20 couples)	Mutually Nonapproving (38 couples)
Politics:			
Child activist		35%	54%
Child not activist		65	46
Religious background:			
Same		95	75
Mixed		5	25
Wife employed		40	46
Not employed		60	54
Power balance:			
Parents over child		65	33
Child over parents		35	67
Affect expressivity:			
High		65	30
Low		35	70
Conflict:	none	50	7
	some	40	71
	much	10	21
Family Integration:			
High		80	36
Low		20	64

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